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ABSTRACT

The West Virginia University Special Education Transition Project trains school guidance and rehabilitation counselors to support disabled students during school-to-work transition. Specifically, project goals are to develop, refine, and implement programs that provide school and rehabilitation counselors with transition and special education competencies to effectively serve individuals with disabilities; provide an externship for trainees to apply and demonstrate newly acquired competencies; measure the impact of the program on services for disabled people; disseminate information to those who complete the program; and internalize program concepts into graduate programs at West Virginia University's College of Human Resources. Ninety-one counselors, counselor trainees, teachers, and doctoral students received 426 credit hours of training. Competency areas covered by the training included advocacy, career education and guidance, case management issues, community and adult service agencies, community survey and job location, interagency cooperation, interdisciplinary team-building, transition curriculum, transition program models, and vocational evaluation. Participants also completed a 13-week externship. Of participants who evaluated the program, 95 percent reported that increased awareness of transition issues was the primary benefit of the project; 69 percent reported that the training facilitated opportunities for school personnel and community counselors to exchange ideas and concerns regarding transition of disabled students; but only 25 percent were able to confirm that professionals surveyed during their externship were acting to improve transition for disabled students. (LP)

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COUNSELORS AND EDUCATORS WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN RURAL AREAS

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COUNSELORS AND EDUCATORS WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN RURAL AREAS

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Background

We know from national studies that transition services and programs in many rural areas are still isolated and in an early stage of development. As teams of key educators in local areas work to develop effective school to work curricula, integration of academic and vocational education will increase (Tindall, 1995). Approximately sixty-five (65%) of persons with disabilities say they want supported and competitive employment, however, more persons who enter the community rehabilitation system enter segregated rather than integrated employment and services (Kiernan, 1994).

The interdisciplinary team approach is crucial because counseling and case management responsibilities require a high level of collaborative teaming, problem solving, and service integration even to support the development of one individual with disabilities. Counselors and case managers report phenomenally large caseloads and high turnover rates in community agencies, affecting both availability and continuity of supports (Gajar, Goodman, and McAfee, 1993).

George Ayers, Executive Director of The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) compiled a Statistical Profile of Special Education Outcomes in the United States based on the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) (Wagner, 1991) and other reports, and published it as a supplement to Teaching Exceptional Children (1994, Jan.). In that profile, he reported that thirty six percent (36.1%) of students with identified learning disabilities; fifty five (54.8%) of students with serious emotional difficulties; and nearly thirty four percent (33.6%) of students with mental impairments do not complete high school. The NLTS results also indicated a high correlation between graduating and post secondary employment. Surely this spells out the urgent need for early teaming to improve transition outcomes, individually, locally, and nationally.

In addition, the collective self-advocates are teaching us that self-monitoring and self-management skills must be learned in a milieu of genuine acceptance and connection with significant other people in the environment (Speaking for Ourselves Conference on Relationships, 1993).

The West Virginia University Special Education Transition Project: Training school guidance and rehabilitation counselors to cooperate in support of individual students with disabilities through their transition from school to work (a three year OSERS grant funded project) had the following goals: (1) to develop, refine, and implement a program designed to provide transition and special education competencies to school and rehabilitation counselors for serving individuals with disabilities; (2) to provide Externship for trainees to apply and demonstrate newly acquired competencies; (3) to measure the impact of the program on services for people with disabilities in the State of West Virginia; (4) to disseminate information to those who completed the program; (5) to attempt to internalize the program concepts into the College of Human Resources and Education's graduate offerings.

Four hundred twenty six (426) credit hours (not including the prerequisite special education credit hours) for One hundred forty two (142) participation units were provided to ninety one (91) unduplicated participating students during the project period. Almost two thirds (62.6%) of the participating students were either preservice or inservice counselors. Thirty three inservice counselors served as team leaders for approximately fourteen county/district teams. Team members were counselors and educators who were interested in

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working together to solve transition issues and concerns. This training was also offered to several doctoral and post doctoral students who assisted with the project. It is hoped that these doctoral students, whose collective emphasis is teacher preparation and research, will spread this type of transition training elsewhere as they pursue their special education and related careers. There were fifty-seven (57) counselors or counselor trainees, twenty-two (22) educators, eleven (11) doctoral students, and one (1) job coach.

The competency areas were more flexible for inservice than for preservice classes, as teams were allowed choices for a minimum of fourteen competency areas to be covered in classes. These areas included but were not limited to advocacy and self-advocacy, career education and guidance, case management issues, community and adult service agencies, community survey and job location, interagency cooperation and responsibilities, interdisciplinary team-building skills, interpersonal communication and social skills development in transitioning learner, job analysis, matching, and accommodations, legislation and litigation, leisure and recreation, occupational references and data bases, parent and community participation, person centered futures planning, resume writing and job-seeking, support networks, toward supportive communities, transition curriculum and destinations, transition problems related to specific disabilities, transition program models, transition evaluation and planning, vocational evaluation, and other identified topics.

Participants in the Transition Course conducted literature reviews, and produced mini papers which they presented to their respective class mates. One group, for example, investigated the provision for and access to public recreation for students with disabilities in their local area. Two students video-taped interviews with personnel in a public residential school in a neighboring state regarding their transition issues and concerns. Other students made recommendations to their school district for refining the Individual Education/Transition Planning Process. Students collected and project personnel compiled a listing of transition questions, references, and resources which were then shared with all regional practicum teams, the WVU Counseling Department, the West Virginia State Transition Coalition, and participants who requested evaluation survey results.

The goal of the Transition Practicum (or Externship) was to further develop transition advocates. With some background training in special education and transition processes, each beginning professional counselor in training should be able to identify the components of programs which aid students with disabilities in successful transition from school to community. When local programs are identified, they can be compared to successful transition programs. Each counselor in training should be able to exit to employment where they can identify transition program components in their locality. Armed thusly, they can then work with their counseling counterparts to advocate for improved local transition efforts.

The Transition Practicum required three major activities and three products to be completed over thirteen weeks. The first activity was the completion of the Transition Survey Checklist (TSC), an internally developed instrument supplied to each student for documenting which transition program components are in place. This instrument was used as the basis for counselors interviewing their counterparts and other key professionals to determine the strengths and needs of systems and programs in terms of transition. The second activity involved shadowing of their counterpart with a brief report on findings. Third was a paper summarizing the conclusions of the student or teams of students working collaboratively to complete the TSC. Information was shared with participating schools and rehabilitation offices.

The project associate reviewed and categorized information resulting from the TSC into three general areas of identified transition needs, service needs, professional needs, and Community Needs, as follows:

Service Needs	Professional Needs	Community Needs
IEP/ITP Process	Professional Collaboration	Transportation
Career Awareness	Cooperative Problem Solving	Job Development
Nontraditional Occupations	Understanding Needs and Concerns	Inter-agency Coordination
Transportation & Mobility	Supportive Stance	Rehabilitation Counseling
Drop Out Prevention	Cross-training for Professionals	Health Services Information
College Preparatory Studies		Quality Day Treatment
Vocational Counseling		Networking, Self-advocacy
Job Placement & Follow-along		Community Awareness
Integrated Academic & Functional Curricula		Increased Case Management

Students had many avenues for evaluating the project, providing formative and summative feedback:

(1) A self-assessment of how each student met the course objectives and interacted during class sessions was conducted, and their recommendations for changes in course delivery were elicited. All participating students rated their participation positively and made useful recommendations for future changes.

(2) Students evaluated guest speakers, illustrating the need to adjust time for questions and discussion after each speaker's presentation.

(3) Classes were evaluated by all students using the standard five-point likert-type scale scored by the University. Ratings were quite satisfactory with many items exceeding the University average. This feedback was particularly helpful to the reflective evaluation of the project associate, who was teaching the course under supervision of the project coordinator.

(4) During the first months of the project, personnel designed and field tested a pre and post "Transition Attitude Scale." Most attitudes remained stable in the predicted direction, however, it is interesting to note that the one attitude showing the most significant change revolved around whether it is important to know the cause of a person's disability when helping them through the transition process.

(5) The follow-up study, Transition Evaluation Survey, was conducted during Summer, 1995, to provide summative feedback and information for project reporting.

The Transition Evaluation Survey

The purpose of this research project was to determine: (a) whether participants feel that experience gained through participating in the Transition Project has affected their involvement in the process of transition for students with disabilities in local areas where they work or live; (b) whether participants think they have gained new or added interest in specific competency areas covered during the Transition Course; and (c) whether participants' awareness of transition issues and concerns was increased through presentations, projects, and discussions during the Course.

Also of interest were participants' responses pertaining to completion of the Transition Practicum Survey Activity. In this activity, participants interviewed transition related professionals and community representatives in local areas using the Transition Survey Checklist (TSC), a tool developed during the Transition Course to ass the development of transition in local areas.

Methods

Procedures

As a follow-up evaluation to the WVU Special Education Transition Project, a self report survey was designed to provide both qualitative and quantitative feedback. The extent to which participants felt that the Transition Courses (alone) or the Transition Course and the Practicum Experience contributed to their professional awareness was measured. The instrument was field tested by the special education doctoral students who had participated in the Project, and their input was incorporated into the design of the questionnaire.

During the Summer,1995, the project associate conducted follow-up research on ninety (90) project participants. Survey data collected included status of employment now and during participation, questions regarding the participants recollections of the Course and Practicum experiences, and their current activities with regard to teaming around transition issues.

Comprehensive sampling was used. Questionnaires with return envelopes were mailed to ninety (90) former participants whose addresses were available. A cover letter explained that that an option to returning the questionnaire by mail was a six minute per call, voice recorded, telephone response. A schedule was established whereby responses could be received. A third party collected, removed identifiers, and transcribed responses.

After survey returns were collected, follow-up phone calls were made to some participants who had expressed interest in further elaboration by returning written permission. Further information about participants' transition involvement and verification of identified needs came from two questions asked on telephone follow-up: "What are you doing about transition since your involvement in the Project?" and, "What do you consider the highest priority transition need in your local area?"

The computer software program, Hyperqual, was used to tag and sort questionnaire responses according to emergent themes. Definitions for the themes evolved, and relationships among them were investigated via inductive analysis. First reading was to search for patterns and possibly misgrouped data; second reading was in relation to research questions posed; third was related to transition needs already identified by collating the data resulting from the TSC; and fourth reading was to match themes with recent results from national studies. Through this process themes were verified. Responses were then examined by comparison to field test results and follow-up phone conversations.

Results were reported to the University and the funding source (OSERS) and shared with the West Virginia State Transition Coalition, Practicum Survey Teams, and those respondents who requested results.

Respondents

The Transition Evaluation Survey Questionnaire return rate was 36 out of 90, or forty percent (40%). Distribution of questionnaires returned across target groups is as follows:

13 (or 36.1%) not employed in a transition related position while taking the Course (only)
7 (or 19.4%) not employed in a transition related position while taking Course & Practicum
8 (or 22.2%) employed in a transition related position while taking the Course (only)
8 (or 22.2%) employed in a transition related position while taking the Course & Practicum

Twenty (20) out of thirty four (34), or fifty nine percent (59%) of preservice participants responded to the Transition Evaluation Questionnaire, while sixteen (16) out of fifty six (56) or twenty nine percent (29%) or inservice participants responded. The response rates are therefore biased toward preservice participants.

Only one (or 2.8%) respondent is currently unemployed, nine (or 25%) are counselors in educational systems, five (or 13.9%) are rehabilitation counselors, three (or 8.3%) are regular educators, nine (or 25%) are special educators, and nine (or 25%) are employed in other categories such as Parent Educator, Youth Wellness Director, Residential Assistant,
Placement Coordinator, or Counseling Practicum Students.

Twenty (20) respondents were not employed at the time of their participation, and only one is currently unemployed. Fourteen (14) are currently employed as counselors, twelve (12) are education personnel, and nine (9) have taken other transition related positions. All thirty five (35) employed respondents are serving students with disabilities throughout the State.

Follow up phone calls to respondents revealed that two were recently hired expressly because of their experience with the WVU Special Education Transition Project. One serves as a transition specialist for court adjudicated youth in a residential treatment facility, and the other is a vocational counselor in a Technology Center. One Rehabilitation Supervisor, who was involved in the Course and Practicum, is making personnel changes in his office to accommodate working with junior high schools to identify and serve students earlier.

Results

Increased awareness of transition issues was reported by ninety five percent (95%) of respondents as the primary benefit of the Project. About half of the respondents had previous experience with the transitional needs and interests of people with disabilities, and fewer still had ever been involved with the transition of one or more individuals with disabilities, particularly among those whose student status was preservice at the time of their involvement in the project. A high number (86%) reported having gained interest in specific topics related to transition, some beyond the scope and content of the Transition Course offered at WVU. Ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents felt that the atmosphere in the Transition Course presented many opportunities fro sharing ideas, with active dialog and much give and take between Rehabilitation and School Personnel.

All of the respondents who had taken the Course and the Practicum thought that the TSC was a very effective tool for investigating and documenting what people in the field are doing about transition. Many were surprised to discover that some good things are in progress, but were also concerned about the future of these efforts in light of recent federal legislative trends.

All of these respondents felt that, if completed carefully and thoroughly, the TSC can also be effective as a transition needs assessment tool sufficient to help them generate concrete recommendations for improving transition in their local areas.

Over two thirds (69%) of respondents reported that the TSC facilitated good opportunities for school personnel and community counselors to exchange ideas and concerns regarding the relationship of education to other service delivery systems. Those who did not cited high burnout levels among professionals and "much red tape" associated with implementing systems changes in certain areas surveyed.

Respondents recognized the necessity of teaming and collaborating to improve the transition process. Eighty five (85%) of those who took the Course and the Practicum completed their TSC Reports in collaboration with other team members or partners. They divided the interview loads, compiled results, clarified issues, identified needs, and prioritized recommendations through collaborative processes. Only one team of preservice counselors had difficulty working collaboratively. Some of these teams have recommended or are beginning to implement process and systems changes in their respective locations.

Respondents are split regarding their reported observation of increased teaming efforts among professionals and community persons in their respective locales, with forty-four percent (44%) confirming, thirty one percent (31%) reporting no teaming observed, and twenty-five percent (25%) not responding or reporting having had no opportunity to observe teaming. Only twenty-five percent (25%) of respondents were able to confirm that professionals are at the point where they are beginning to take roles to improve transition for students with disabilities in areas surveyed.

Discussion

Emergent themes regarding transition in West Virginia that share commonality with field tests, follow-up phone calls, and Transition Survey Checklist results obtained by the Transition Practicum Groups are grouped into three types: professional needs, service needs, and community needs. Respondents confirmed professional needs for increased collaborative teaming and cooperative problem solving among agencies; for increased knowledge and awareness of transition issues and concerns; and for increased communication and linkages among professionals, between school and community, and between school and home. Respondents confirmed service needs by identifying and prioritizing efforts to refine and bolster the individual education/transition planning process; provide career awareness and exploration activities at all levels, increase job development and follow-along; and integrate functional and academic skills in curriculum at all levels.

Finally, respondents confirmed community needs for increasing parent and community awareness of the transition process; improving rehabilitation counseling availability to learners at earlier grade levels; supporting family networking and self-advocacy; and participating in political processes necessary to insure continued, sufficient development and allocation of resources to support these efforts.

Implications

On-going evaluation of the development of transition, particularly in rural regions of the Country, is essential to supporting transition of individuals with disabilities through school to adult living. As indicated by the results of this study, professionals are currently at the stage

of planning and developing strategies to support transition in their local areas, and some professionals are forming collaborative teams, however, teaming and role-taking among professionals is not happening to a sufficient degree across areas surveyed. The West Virginia Department of Education has initiated Next Steps Training, however, many districts remain isolated from other programs and have not yet completed their training. Transition outcomes of students receiving special education services continue to be poor in spite of some good things that are happening in widely separated areas. The challenge is formidable. It requires networking and creative efforts to develop resources from the entire community.

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